

## Minneapolis, Crystal, Robbinsdale want say on plan to reroute freight, oil rail

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Crystal City Council Member Olga Parsons' reaction to two railroads' plan to turn mile-long oil and freight trains sharply south toward Minneapolis and Theodore Wirth Park echoes that of other residents and businesses along the proposed route.

She's alarmed.

"It's staggering," Parsons said last week, as the BNSF and Canadian Pacific railways moved ahead with their plan to connect a pair of tracks in Crystal that they say will allow them to ease rail congestion across their networks. "A disaster could occur and wipe us off the map."

Parsons and other Crystal officials are frustrated by what they see as a lack of candor on the part of the railroads. "We suspect the railroads are doing all they can to avoid the environmental impact statement," said Crystal city planner John Sutter.

BNSF denies that. "We will comply fully with the environmental review required by federal regulation," said BNSF spokeswoman Amy McBeth. Canadian Pacific has refused to discuss the plan publicly.

Creating the connection is "routine and on a smaller scale than the construction of new mainline track," McBeth said.

BNSF and Canadian Pacific tracks now cross each other in Crystal, but do not connect. Adding a connection would allow eastbound freight trains to turn south. Trains would slow to 25 miles per hour to navigate the turn, potentially blocking five intersections in Crystal and Robbinsdale at the same time.

"This project would use existing rail infrastructure to more efficiently move trains through the metro area," McBeth said in a written statement. "The railroad tracks in Robbinsdale were once used more frequently by our predecessor railroad. In recent decades, that traffic has been reduced, but as in any rail corridor, rail traffic can fluctuate."

Currently, Canadian Pacific's line carries as many as two dozen freight and oil trains a day, while the BNSF line, which runs along Bottineau Boulevard, serves only two short trains a day. With the new plan, traffic along the BNSF line would increase.

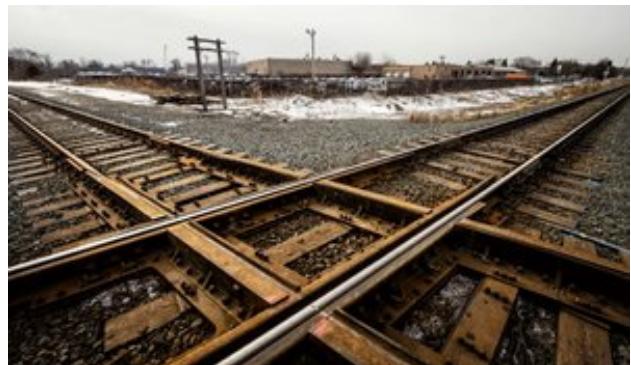
Crystal and Robbinsdale leaders, who learned about the plan from an affected landowner, recently had their first meetings with BNSF.

### Concerns in Minneapolis

Down the line in Minneapolis, that city's Park and Recreation Board is also watching the situation closely. "We are trying to learn more about it as quickly as we can," said Park Board spokeswoman Dawn Sommers. "We are aware of their intentions, and we are concerned about the impacts on Theodore Wirth Regional Park, the largest park in our system at 700 acres."

The BNSF line is also the same stretch of track now being discussed as the possible corridor for the Blue Line extension of the region's light-rail system.

Minneapolis City Council Member Kevin Reich, who represents the First Ward, said it's all on his radar. "Increased rail traffic



Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Canadian Pacific plan to create a connection here between their intersecting tracks in Crystal.

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is part of a healthy economy, but we want to be cautious and be prepared," Reich said.

But even the talk of increased freight traffic has one Twin Cities businessman rethinking a multimillion-dollar business deal along the line in Minneapolis. Daniel Justesen says he's reconsidering his preferred site along Bassett Creek for the Bryn Mawr Brewing Co. and taproom. Railroad tracks cross the sole driveway in and out of the site.

"The deal is definitely in limbo. There are two issues. One is access and the other is ambience. It would change from being the quiet, rustic experience in the city," said Justesen, who had been a part owner of Vine Park Brewing Co. in St. Paul.

#### Seeking help from feds

Robbinsdale and Crystal city leaders now are trying to muster support from state and federal officials, including Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., but city leaders say they face an uphill battle. Because railroads are federally regulated, there isn't much that cities, counties or even the state can do.

"It's hard to see what can be done," Crystal's Parsons said. "We are struggling with this."

An environmental-impact statement overseen by the federal Surface Transportation Board could be the cities' and the public's one window for input.

"Our office has spoken with [Hennepin County Commissioner Mike Opat] and contacted BNSF on behalf of local residents to make sure these serious concerns about rail are heard, and we will continue to work on this issue," Klobuchar said in a written statement.

Bills have been introduced in both houses at the Legislature that call for the Surface Transportation Board to require an environmental-impact statement for this proposed connection and to seek funding to improve one of the rail crossings if the connection is made.

#### Ready to buy the land

BNSF is in contact with the landowner at the track nexus along West Broadway. The railroad has surveyed the property, marked the proposed connection and had the property appraised, according to the property owner. That property holds a tow truck company and an auto body shop leasing space.

"They sent us a letter [saying] they are interested in buying it," said Jon Horkey, who co-owns the property. The railroad has not yet made an offer, he said.

Parsons, who lives three blocks south of the Canadian Pacific line, said she, her husband and two children hear up to a dozen freight trains a day and "spend a lot of time waiting on rail traffic."

Aside from nuisance and safety issues, constant freight traffic could cut the city in half, hurting businesses and quality of life, she said.

"This is a great small-town atmosphere in the Twin Cities. It's a spectacular place to live," Parsons said of Crystal. "If you have to get on the highway to get to the other side of town, it's really destroyed it."

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